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ABSTRACT

School governance has recently come under scrutiny as one of the many areas of public education being examined in the educational reform movement. School boards are being criticized by state governments, educational experts, and the public. Crisis situations have developed in many educational systems nationwide, particularly in urban areas. In addition to poor relationships between school boards and superintendents, many school boards have become bogged down in micromanagement. Attempts to solve these problems have included school-based management, contracted school management, and charter schools. Two major reports, one by the Institute for Educational Leadership and the other by the Twentieth Century Fund, suggest changing school boards into educational boards, forming Children and Youth Coordinating Boards, encouraging better relationships with local government, and improving the public image of and involvement in school boards. However, some school boards see these reform efforts as attempts to erode their power and place on them undeserved blame. (JPT)

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ERIC DIGEST

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The Changing Role of School Boards

By Ellen Todras

During the past decade, the fundamentals of American education have been examined with a fine-tooth comb. As consensus grows that the current educational system is largely unable to keep pace with the nation's changing needs, more attention is being devoted to reform. Areas touched by reform efforts include school choice, school-based management, teacher effectiveness, national goals, and student assessment, to name a few.

Recently, school governance has also come under scrutiny. Local school boards—"the traditional linchpin of American educational governance" (Twentieth Century Fund 1992) —are encountering criticism from several sources: state governments, educational experts, and the very populations they attempt to represent.

What Problems Undermine School Board Effectiveness?

Frustration with school boards has reached crisis proportions in several "hot spots" across the nation. In Chicago, for example, most decision-making authority has been transferred to elected local school councils. Kentucky's Education Reform Act of 1990 grants far-reaching powers to the state and to local school councils (Pipho 1992). And in 1991 the state of Massachusetts abolished the nation's first elected school board in Boston and replaced it with one appointed by the mayor.

The problem seems to be exacerbated in large cities, where schools struggle to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population in an increasingly dangerous setting. Although only 4 percent of American school districts enroll more than 10,000 students, almost half of our nation's students attend these districts (Olson and Bradley 1992). The size of such districts is in itself a problem.

In addition, school board-superintendent relations in large cities often fare poorly. In 1990, twenty of the twenty-five largest central city superintendencies lay vacant (Twentieth Century Fund). Most superintendents in large cities stay only an average of three years. Those who leave cite confusion of roles between the school board and the superintendent as one of the greatest causes for resigning (McCurdy 1993).

Perhaps the greatest problem facing both rural and urban school boards is their tendency to micromanage and become bogged down in minutiae. In Tucson, Arizona, for example, the school board met 172 times in one year. In West Virginia, a five-year statewide study of board minutes found that boards spent only 3 percent of their time on policy development and oversight, compared to 54 percent on administrative matters (Olson and Bradley).

Today, the very legitimacy of school boards is being called into question. Turnout for school board elections is alarmingly low; in New York City only 7 percent of registered voters may cast ballots in board elections. In addition, those who are elected increasingly consider themselves advocates for special interest groups (Schlechty 1992). When members represent narrow interests, board effectiveness suffers.

What Reforms Have Already Been Enacted at State and Local Levels?

In some localities reform of school governance is already under way. A widespread method of reform is school-based management. The entire state of Kentucky has reformed school governance in this way, as have many school districts, including Rochester, New York, and Miami, Florida. Chicago uses a modified school-based management plan in which elected local school committees select the principals and help guide instructional reform (Twentieth Century Fund).

Some districts contract out school management. In Chelsea, Massachusetts, for example, the school system is run by Boston University.

The charter school, a third model, is a sequel to the concept of school choice. A charter school is an entirely new school set up by a qualified group or institution. A responsible public body, such as a school board, officially sponsors the school, which must be free, open to all, and nonsectarian. California and Minnesota are two states experimenting with charter schools.

Perhaps the most radical school governance reform would be modeled after the system in Hawaii, where the state directly runs the schools. Under this model, school boards simply do not exist.

What Additional Reforms Have Been Proposed?

In April 1992 a task force convened by the Twentieth Century Fund and the Danforth Foundation released a report on the current system of school governance and made recommendations for reform. Just months later, another major report was pub-

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lished by the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL).

There is considerable overlap between recommendations made by the Twentieth Century Fund and the IEL, since two of the three authors of the IEL study also served on the Twentieth Century Fund task force. Both reports propose comprehensive reforms of our school governance system:

- School boards should be transformed into education policy boards, which would be responsible for establishing and overseeing policy, not implementing it. States would repeal all current regulations regarding school boards, and instead establish performance criteria to hold policy boards accountable for student progress.
- Children and Youth Coordinating Boards should be established to link and coordinate the delivery of services for children with multiple needs (Twentieth Century Fund).
- Large-city school boards in particular should strive to develop a close relationship with city government "to ensure the coordination of youth services" (Twentieth Century Fund).
- Several recommendations were proposed to increase legitimacy of school boards. To increase voter turnout, school board elections should be held in conjunction with general elections. In addition, the state should refuse to certify a school board election unless at least 20 percent of the voters turn out. Finally, candidates' financial disclosures should not be "so intensive that it discourages citizens from serving" (Twentieth Century Fund).

In addition to recommendations contained in these two reports, a host of other experts offer proposals for changing the system. Paul Hill of the RAND Corporation, for example, believes in separating governance from delivery of services. Boards would set goals and contractors would deliver them, under his plan (Harrington-Lueker 1993).

James Guthrie, professor of education at the University of California-Berkeley, advocates down-sizing—breaking large urban districts into more manageable units. The state of Ohio is considering such subdivisions (Harrington-Lueker).

Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, has suggested restricting school board meetings to once a year. Such a change would "force boards to concentrate on their primary task of setting general educational goals" (Hildebrand 1992).

How Would Proposed Changes Affect the Power of School Boards?

Since the 1980s school boards have been experiencing erosion of power. State regulations have eaten into school board authority from above, while teacher unions and school-based management have worn away at it from below. Instead of viewing recent increased state involvement as usurping school board authority, Conley (1993) sees it as an opportunity for schools to focus their attention on "issues of internal coordination and quality control."

Some proposed innovations in governance might actually provide a welcome respite for school boards. Ted Kolderie, of the Minneapolis-based Center for Policy Studies, sees boards associated with charter schools as having greater flexibility as buyers of education (Harrington-Lueker).

In general, school boards and administrators believe they work best together when there is flexibility between the policy-making and administrative arms of governance (McCurdy). This appears to be in conflict with many recent proposals that advise eliminating any administrative board functions.

What Do School Boards Think of These Changes and Recommendations?

With many in the education community taking "pot shots" at school governance, it would be naive to think that school boards would not respond. Thomas Shannon, executive director of the National School Boards Association, contends that the Twentieth Century Fund task force report "searches for education scapegoats in school boards" (1992). The task force, he notes, criticizes school boards for obstructing change but fails to take into account the fact that often "neither the funds nor the public are there to support the changes." In addition, Shannon charges that the task force recommendations undercut "the American institution of representative governance of public education."

Some experts note that with the educational landscape shifting so rapidly, school governance systems cannot expect to remain static (Olson and Bradley). Others suggest that school boards may lose local control entirely if they do not keep pace with overall reform efforts (Harrington-Lueker). Then again, it is possible that the current wave of criticism will pass and school boards will remain relatively unchanged.

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